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SHEEP AND SHEPHERD

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Acts 4:5-12, John 10:11-18

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, . . ." John 10:14 (NRSV)

Hanging on the wall of my study there is a shepherd's crook — a real one. I like it a lot. It reminds me that "shepherd" is one of the names my job is called sometimes. But mostly it reminds me of the time when it was given to me as a gift in Scotland. I almost couldn't get it in the country, as a matter of fact. The airport security people thought it might be a long slender tube full of white powder. TWA thought I might decide to use it as a weapon somewhere over the Atlantic. Finally, a wary flight attendant helped me bury it in the very back of the hanging luggage compartment.

It was given to me by Angus MacDonald — that really was his name — a sheep farmer and, as necessary, a shepherd. Mr. MacDonald was the Clerk of the Session of the Wamphray Parish Kirk, a tiny church of about fifteen families, in the hills of the border country in Scotland, ten miles outside the town of Moffat, where I was serving as pastor and where we were living for the summer. The Wamphray Parish was too small to afford its own resident clergy and so the Church of Scotland assigned the minister in Moffat responsibility for conducting worship on Sunday night at Wamphray and tending to the pastoral needs of the people. So on Sunday evening, not always with much enthusiasm, I would set out up the winding narrow road to the Wamphray Kirk. It was only ten miles but the country was rugged and so were the people. I could barely understand their thick border brogue. They were rough — I'll never forget Angus MacDonald's hands: gnarled, chapped, strong. All the people in Wamphray were related, and they all raised sheep. I had visited them in their homes. I had slogged through the mud to see a lamb in the barn because its mother had died. I had walked up into the hills a bit with Angus to see how the sheep were faring. The shepherd's job was to drive the sheep up the mountain each morning and more or less keep track of them. I never did quite understand how that happened. As far as I could see the only time sheep became a flock was when they were gathered in for clipping, or when they had to be moved. Mostly, where I was, sheep simply wandered around, sometimes down the sidewalk of the village, often sleeping in the middle of the road to gather warmth from the black top. It's why all the gardens in front of the houses in Scotland are fenced with latched gates. sheep or two who wander in can make short work of nasturtiums and roses in very short order.

We had all gone to a clipping one time and to our new friend's amusement insisted on helping; straddling a frightened sheep as a man wrestled it to the ground to be relieved of its coat; pushing it through a disinfectant bath and then dipping a brush in a can of dye and painting an identification letter or symbol on the sheep's naked side — its baptism, I thought. We helped with Robert Neil's sheep: the letter on the side was "N." He patiently showed our youngsters how to do it. One was having trouble putting letters on wiggling sheep and so many of Robert Neil's ended up with "Zs" on the sides instead of "Ns" that year. Everybody heard about that — Angus MacDonald was amused by it.

I didn't know whether my midwestern middle-American sermons were doing anything. Scots don't ordinarily let you know. But I suspected we really weren't connecting — the Wamphray folks and I. On our last Sunday, at the end of the service, following the benediction, none of the twenty or so people moved from the pews. I thought I had finally done it. They were all in a trance. Angus walked slowly to the front, carrying a shepherd's crook, and in his thick border brogue, thanked me for bringing the word of Jesus to them, and because I was so interested in sheep, he wanted me to have one of his crooks, made of hard wood and a ram's horn.

It's on my wall and I think about how hard it is to be a shepherd: how it's lonely work, how shepherds are pretty low on the social scale in spite of their romanticized expressions on Christmas cards. Nobody much wants to be a shepherd when there are real sheep to be tended. And I also try to remember that when the image appears in scripture it has nothing whatever to do with shepherding as a metaphor for professional ministry or ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is, rather, a term Jesus uses for himself.

> "I am the good shepherd." And, centuries before, the loveliest of Israel's hymns: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . ."

Barbara Brown Taylor says that even though Christian people love the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, sooner or later the preacher has to break the bad news to them that they are the sheep, metaphorically speaking, and sheep, everybody knows, are pretty dumb. Taylor says that's not true actually. Sheep aren't dumb at all.

> "It is the cattle ranchers who are responsible for that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you because they prefer to be led. Sheep," Taylor says, "will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first, namely their shepherd — who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right." [*The Preaching Life*, p. 140-141]

Someone else suggested that centuries of being raised to produce wool and lamb chops have bred out of sheep any natural instincts for self-protection and defense. When attacked, sheep panic. I don't know about any of that — but I do know that sheep wander around a lot, that their wandering gets them in a lot of trouble and that I never pray the General Confession "we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep" without smiling inside because I've seen that and I've seen myself — as I suspect you see yourself — stray, not out of evilness, wickedness, not even intentionally, but out of aimlessness. The shepherd's crook reminds me of how often Jesus described the human predicament not in terms of breaking rules, committing bad acts, but in terms of being lost, wandering around aimlessly.

And I do recall how vulnerable sheep can be on occasion. Once, on an afternoon walk we came upon a sheep, lying on its back, its legs flailing the air, bleating pathetically.

We learned later that when a big sheep, with a full coat of wool, gets wet, waterlogged and lies down — its coat is so heavy that sometimes it can't get back up. And as it tries, it gets turned all the way over and is in real trouble. If the shepherd doesn't come along and stand it up again, it can die.

Jesus said:

> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I know my own and my own know me." He also said — enigmatically — "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, . . . so there will be one flock, . . ."

The theme continues. Later in the chapter his critics are badgering him:

> "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." And he said, equally enigmatically, "I have told you, and you do not believe. . . . because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

There is a lot going on there theologically. And what strikes me about it is that while Jesus' critics seem to want to focus on what to believe about him, his emphasis is on belonging to him, belonging to the flock. He says three things that intrigue me. "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." That's exactly opposite from the way we approach it. We assume that you get admitted to the flock of Jesus by believing certain things about him. You are a Christian on the basis of ideas about him which you can affirm as truth. There's a great debate going on in the Presbyterian family at this moment about that issue and people are saying some unkind things about other Presbyterians, calling one another pagans and heretics because some seem not to be saying and believing the right things about him. But he says, you don't believe in me because you don't belong. That is, belonging to him comes first: believing happens after one starts to live in relationship with him. I don't know any other way to be a church, frankly. We can't measure one another's theological orthodoxy every Sunday morning. We don't ask these new members to explain the doctrines of incarnation and atonement as a prerequisite for getting in. What we ask them is if they trust Jesus and mean to follow him. At some point we have to say that this business of being a Christian starts when we voluntarily join the flock and start to listen to the shepherd's voice.

Catholic scholar Gerald Sloyan says that the intent of this passage is to include and not exclude and that it is a terrible travesty when churches spend their energy calling other Christians names and insisting that they aren't in the flock. This gracious Catholic scholar asks:

> "Why not assume that anybody is in who wants in and let the spirit work on unity and theology and ecclesiology from the inside?"

The second intriguing thing he said was: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." There has been a lot of scholarly energy invested in identifying the "other sheep." Jews? Gentiles who had not yet heard? Pagans?

The most important issue confronting the religious thinkers of the world is how to deal with rival truth claims: how to live in a world where different groups claim access to absolute truth — and it is not the same truth. Until fairly recently that has been an academic question. It is not academic today. Professor Hans Küng has been teaching and writing that there will be no peace in the world until there is some peace among the religions of the world and has worked out a way to affirm the absoluteness of my truth without denying the absoluteness of your truth. And it all sounded terribly esoteric — until Islamic fundamentalism began to be expressed politically a few years ago, and until Sikhs started killing Hindus, and Christian evangelicals declared a cultural war, and Jewish zealots started shooting at praying Muslims, and African American Black Muslims started suggesting that the world would be better off with fewer Jews, as Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam said again last week in a speech at Howard University.

Just last month there was a very important article in *The Journal of Foreign Affairs* by Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington. It was picked up by both Peter Steinfels of the *New York Times* and Martin Marty in his newsletter, *Context.* Professor Huntington says the future will be shaped by civilizations, not nation states, and that civilizations differ from one another along fault lines of "history, language, culture, traditions and, most important, religion." The nation state is weakening as a source of identity . . . witness what used to be Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Rwanda — and, Professor Huntington writes,

> "In much of the world religion rushes in to fill the gap, often in forms that are called 'fundamentalism' in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam."

And so when Jesus talks about having sheep who are his but who do not belong to the particular flock, it seems to me that his people ought to sit up and take notice and entertain the notion at least that we are not the only repository of truth and that his Lordship over all the world, all of history, all people, which we do believe, may not necessarily mean that everybody has to recite the Apostles' Creed.

> "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way" the prophet wrote.

There's plenty of freedom here. The invitation is to come to the Shepherd, but everyone is free to ignore it, to wander around aimlessly.

Using sheep as an image of the people is, I think, pure Hebrew genius. But, frankly, it would not be our image of choice. We'd much prefer self-sufficiency, strong, self-directed, autonomous, goal-oriented achievers. Tigers, maybe! That's who we modern Americans think we are, not vulnerable sheep, wandering around aimlessly. But sometimes there's a crack in the veneer.

The recent suicide of rock star Kurt Cobain, who some of us had never ever heard of, struck a deep nerve in the culture. *Newsweek* said that in his music he mixed "twenty-something rage and disillusionment and came out with the lyric, 'Oh, well, whatever, never mind.'" The magazine's sad conclusion about his life and death mentioned a "void in his heart."

Two weeks ago I attended a remarkable event. Cornel West, bestselling author of *Race Matters*, chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Princeton, probably the hottest lecturer on the college circuit, and a confessing Christian, was in Chicago for several speeches. On Wednesday evening he was scheduled to speak in Rockefeller Chapel on the campus of the University of Chicago — a very large space which is not ordinarily close to full, particularly for worship on Sunday morning. We arrived about five minutes before the hour and were astonished to find every seat taken, thousands of people, most young, most students — standing to applaud this lecturer who begins by explaining where he's coming from, namely the African American Christian tradition —

> "You know" he said, "the one that finds meaning in suffering, that tries to do good things, the one that focuses on a poor, homeless, swarthy, dark-skinned Jew on a cross."

Astonishing in that secular place!

West described students at Princeton in a way that by implication would apply to his University of Chicago audience, "young, highly energetic, brilliant and empty."

Sometimes there are cracks in our vaunted veneer of self-sufficiency. Sometimes even the brightest and strongest and best of us know what human vulnerability is about, and emptiness, and aimlessness: like that pathetic sheep, lying upside down under the weight of its own waterlogged wool, helpless, until the shepherd comes along and stands it up and points it in the right way.

Which brings me to the third thing he said that intrigues me — this most of all.

> "I know my own and my own know me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

It's the most majestic idea in the whole reservoir of human ideas. The shepherd knows us, knows our name . . . and no one will ever snatch us away.

Who can understand it or explain it? "The Lord is my shepherd . . ." God knows that you are; cares about the fact that there is a you; gives a Shepherd whose very life is dedicated to you and your wholeness and your well-being. Contemporary author, Reynolds Price puts it plainly — writing about the Gospel of John:

> "Bizarre as it is in so many parts, he says in the clearest voice we have, the sentence that mankind craves from stories: The maker of all things loves and wants me." [*Incarnation*, p. 72]

We belong to Jesus Christ. We are his forever. No one, no thing, shall ever take us from him.

There is an occasion which always reminds me — because I'm as inclined to forget to whom I belong as the next person. Ministers take communion to shut-ins. We try particularly to take the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper to our members who are in retirement homes during holy week. It is always a good and happy experience for the minister and for the people. Most of them. But some of them are not well. Some have Alzheimer's disease or some similar condition. Some, quite literally, don't know any longer where they are, or what they are doing there. Some have forgotten who they are. And we are privileged to sit with them and say the familiar words, "Jesus took bread . . . take, eat, in remembrance of me." And they do. Somehow they remember whose they are, when they can't remember much of anything else. You know they remember, they know, because as we pray the Lord's Prayer and say the Twenty-third Psalm, you can hear them quietly recovering a word or two . . . "he makes me lie down in green pastures . . . even though I walk . . . thou art with me . . . thy rod and staff . . ." Remembering, at some deep mystical level, whose they are, that they — we — all of us — belong to Jesus; that he knows us: that he is our Shepherd: that we are his forever: that no one, no thing, will ever snatch us from his hand.

All praise to him.